

# The Way It Was

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**UNIT:** Hawaiian Air Force

**TIME PERIOD:** December 7, 1941

**SOURCE:** Story as told to audience at U.S.S. Arizona Memorial, edited by Adam Elia

**DATE RECEIVED:** 19 April 2003

Thank you very much. I want to set the scene of what happened on December 7<sup>th</sup> by going back to December 6<sup>th</sup>, the Saturday before. I'm from Wheeler Field, which is in the middle of the island up here. We were all lined up in the morning at 10:00 for inspection of the aircraft and the pilots. Wingtip to wingtip the planes were lined up in the space in front of the hangars. We had spent one week in intensive training in defense of the island. The aircraft had already loaded with ammunition during that week but on Friday we took out the ammunition out of the airplanes and we had emptied our planes lined up wingtip to wingtip.

After our inspection was concluded at 10:00 Saturday Morning Colonel Flood, the base commander, had requested that the airplanes be dispersed to earthen revetments (we had around 100 of them) surrounding the airfield. Well, he was turned down by the echelon command because we did not have enough guards to guard the individual aircraft if we dispersed them around the field. We were on an anti-sabotage alert at that time which meant we had to protect the public facilities.

So at 1000 in the morning that Saturday when we were dismissed, Joe Powell, a pilot friend; and I we headed for Honolulu and my 1940 Chevy Convertible, top down. We had dates in Honolulu. We picked up the girls and we went to Blowhole, which is a pretty wild place to be swimming if any of you are familiar with that. We spent the afternoon at Blowhole swimming and drinking beer and having a good time and that evening we went to Trader Vic's, which was the only nightclub in Honolulu at that time; it's quite a bit different today. At about 1:30 in the morning we left Trader Vic's and took the girls back to their home and we headed up towards Wheeler Field. Now the road that goes up to Wheeler Field passes in back along the Koolau mountain range here back then it was just a two lane road and as it rose up over some of the hills at the base of the mountain we could see the whole panorama of Pearl Harbor. There were so many ships in the harbor and they were all lighted up, stem to stern with strings of light. This was a custom for the Navy which they did on weekends, but this particular morning of December 7<sup>th</sup> at 2:00 in the morning, I was so impressed with the number of lights that I saw down there I nudged Joe awake who was sleeping and I said "Joe, look down there. Did you ever see so many lights at Pearl Harbor?" Joe looked down drowsily and said "Boy what a target that would make.", went promptly back to sleep for the 15 minute ride we made to Wheeler Field.

We were staying in the barracks, the Bachelor Officers Quarters, which was temporary building a few hundred yards from the flightline. Shortly after 0700 Sunday morning, I was standing in the latrine looking out at this very peaceful scene of the hangar line where the aircraft were lined up wingtip to wingtip: our good P-40s, our best line aircraft were lined up, and few P-36s were scattered not in that lineup. I was watching, and suddenly this airplane dove out of the sky over the hangar line, dropped an object which exploded into a huge orange blossom and then pulled up sharply. As he pulled up I saw these two "meatballs" on this plane, "meatballs" was the Japanese insignia of a solid red circle of the rising sun. I knew immediately that these were Japanese aircraft and I yelled down the corridor that we were being attacked by the Japs.

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I went into my room, I put some shoes on, and I strapped a web belt with a .45 caliber pistol around my pajamas and ran I down to the flight line to see if I can do anything about salvaging the aircraft because the P-40s, being lined up wingtip to wingtip, when one exploded it would ignite the one next to it like a chain of Chinese firecrackers. Three other pilots and I managed to salvage four P-36s, which was a rather obsolete aircraft, and some armorers came as they had pulled some ammunition, .50 caliber and .30 caliber ammunition in belts and picked those up out of this hangar which where the ammunition had been stored and also was ignited in the firing. With tracers shooting all over the place. Now they jumped on the wing of the aircraft, and during a lull in the attack, we taxied out to the earthen revetments surrounding the field. We got to the earthen revetments and we proceeded to load aircraft with .50 caliber and .30 caliber ammunition.

The P-36 had two guns, both of them firing through the propeller, two machine guns. But they just simply didn't behave like machine guns when you think of a machine gun as being rapid fire. Because we had to fire through the blades of the prop as it was turning, it meant that we had a very slow rate of fire. So it's like a funeral cadence.

We took off in formation, the four of us: Lou Sanders, my squadron commander; Gordon Sterling, his wingman; John Thacker in the second element, and I was his wingman. We took off and headed towards the Koolau mountain range, up here to the right. We charged our guns and in the process of charging the guns, you're in the cockpit you pull a charging handle back as far as your ear, and then let it slide forward and it puts a bullet in the chamber. The .30 caliber was on my right side so I pulled it back, charged it, and I pulled the trigger to make sure I could fire the gun. Nothing happened. I pulled it back and put another bullet in the chamber, pulled the trigger, nothing happened and I had a dead gun; I couldn't fire it, couldn't use it. The .50 caliber I pulled it back the same way and let it slide in and it started to fire by itself. In other words, I had a runaway gun. I didn't have to pull the trigger it would just start firing. So I had to stop this waste of ammunition in firing so I had to keep it cocked back there, and I was really loaded for bear.

We climbed to the Koolau mountain range, and had instructions to go to Bellows Field, which was under attack at that time. But when we got to about 7,000 feet, we got instructions to go to Kaneohe Bay which was now under attack. We turned towards Kaneohe Bay. While climbing to about 9,000 feet, we met a bunch of Zeros which was the worse thing that could happen to us in the airplanes we were flying. We just exploded (into dogfighting); one Zero came perpendicular to me and as I led him several plane lengths, I let that .50 caliber slide back in again and it started firing by itself and I saw a couple of puffs in his fuselage; I saw him smoking. Then at that time, another zero came head on to me and almost rammed me. I pulled up violently to the right to avoid being rammed by him and as I pulled up, another zero got me in his sights and he blew out my canopy, shot up my tail wheel, severed my hydraulic lines, and severed my rudder cables. I was pretty much out of control and I tumbled down out of control trying to regain control of the airplane, until finally about 5 or 6,000 feet I got control of it. The cloud layer wasn't that level also, so I was popping in out of the clouds trying to maintain control of this airplane and heading back towards Wheeler Field. I was pretty vulnerable to attack at that point because I could barely fly the airplane, so I was lucky to be popping in and out of those clouds at that time.

As I headed back towards Wheeler Field, Lt. Sanders (the squadron commander) pulled up beside me. He saw that my canopy was shattered, he saw all the holes in my airplane, he saw I was having trouble flying the airplane. He gave me a signal, asking me if I was okay, I gave him the signal that I was okay, and we headed back towards Wheeler Field to land. Fortunately, the Japanese aircraft had all left by that time headed back to their carriers. As we got over Schofield Barracks, which was right next door to Wheeler Field, they had gotten themselves pretty well organized and started firing at us, fortunately they were bum shots. As I turned onto base lane, I put down my landing gear, and the indicator showed that my landing

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gear was not down; my hydraulic line had been all shot up. On final, I was pumping madly with an emergency hydraulic pump. As I flared out to touch down, my gear locked into place and I touched down. There were no runways at Wheeler Field at that time, just grass, and the morning dew was still there when I came back to land. So (when) I touched down, it was very skiddy. I had no directional control. I cut my engine and I spun around a couple of times, and finally came to a stop.

I was sitting in the airplane trying to collect my thoughts; everything had been automatic before then. I looked around: the hangars were still on fire, the ammunition and tracers were shooting out of the hangar over our heads (bullets stored in the hangar that ignited from the flames). The P-40s were all lined up, their backs broken and their noses pointing toward the sky. As I looked down towards Pearl Harbor, I saw this huge cloud of smoke covering the whole horizon, and amidst this huge black smoke were these huge orange blossoms exploding. It was very reminiscent of (Operation) Desert Storm, when they ignited the oil fields. I sat there another couple of minutes, my pajamas were soaking wet; and I'm not sure it was just sweat. I got out of the airplane and walked up to my barracks, changed into a dry flight suit and came back to the line to see what I could do. Everybody was pitching in trying to salvage the few airplanes that were left over, pulling them away from the flames. We managed to get some together, and we immediately started to arm those aircraft and fly them again. We put them on what we called Combat Air Patrol, or CAP we set around the perimeter of the island and maintained a 24 hour alert for about a day and half till finally the realization came to us that this type of attack we had would not be accompanied by any invasion., because the troopships could never have kept up with the speed of the carriers who came on that sudden attack. We finally got into a condition of war.